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The future is now

The DI Mission in the 21st Century

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Before dawn on 23 October 1983, I was awakened by a call from the CIA Operations Center. The US Marine barracks in Beirut apparently had been attacked with some type of explosive. As the political analyst on Lebanon, I came in to cover the story. During that day, I found out that a car bomb had killed over 200 US marines. By 10:00 a.m., analysts from the Directorate of Intelligence's (DI) Near East and South Asia (NESA) Division were briefing CIA officials, other agencies,

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Although information on the tragedy was trickling in, we believed we were better informed than almost anyone in Washington about what had happened.

If a similar tragedy occurred today, the media coverage of it would be different. The entire country would be tuned to the Cable News Network (CNN), which, more quickly than the other networks, would devote its air time to showing reports from its correspondents on the scene. We would have little reason to doubt the enormity of the attack because we would be seeing live coverage of the devastation. (In 1983, it was not until later in the morning that we had a firm handle on how many had died.) The Commonwealth representatives would not have to come to Langley, knowing that the CNN coverage was timely and generally accurate. CNN also would be interviewing "experts" who would speculate on the perpetrators of the attack and its ramifications. The widespread TV coverage would largely preempt what an analyst would say in print the next morning, unless there was overnight intelligence

identifying the actual instigators. In fact, the first thing the analyst would do when he or she got to work would be to turn on CNN so a timely situation report could be written.

The pace of change in the world during the 1980s means that "future shock" is now. As the example on Lebanon illustrates, the impact on the DI has already been substantial. Critics are questioning the CIA's value, and the alleged failure to predict major world events has left the DI uniquely vulnerable to cheap shots. Whatever the case, the DI faces revolutionary challenges during the next 10 years. These challenges will be particularly formidable because of the rapid changes in the area in which the DI makes its living—information.

Anyone who has worked in the DI during the last 10 years has his own idea of the nature of these challenges. Based on my 11 years of experience in regional offices, I believe the DI will have to deal with three major challenges: the information age, the devaluation of intelligence, and a crisis of self-doubt.

The Age of Cable News

CNN recently ran an advertisement claiming that people in Washington who need to be in the know watch CNN. The wording of the commercial made one wonder whether or not CNN in fact was aware that the major intelligence centers in Washington depend upon CNN for timely information. Analysts who have worked on several recent crises readily admit that they acquired information fastest through cable news.

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It is one thing to say that analysts use CNN. It is another to claim that the revolution in information has forced changes in the DI's analytical effort. But I would argue that the almost instantaneous coverage of world events by the media, the visual impact of wall-to-wall CNN news feed, and even the more comprehensive articles by the daily newspapers have made it much more difficult for DI analysts to provide the policymaker with unique and timely current intelligence. We no longer have a monopoly on information or analysis. CNN competes with us on the former, and National Public Radio, Nightline, and in-house experts vie with us on the latter.

In some cases, DI analysts have been put on the defensive because their articles in the *National Intelligence Daily* (NID) did not jibe with the way the story played in the press. A case in point is the rebel offensive in 1989 in El Salvador. Unlike the press, the DI believed that the offensive had failed militarily from the start. What we failed to anticipate was that press coverage of rebel efforts would keep the offensive alive for weeks and that, in fact, the rebels would start conducting operations with an eye toward media coverage. This coverage and its different slant forced an adjustment in the tone of current intelligence. We became reluctant to write unequivocally that the military had the situation in San Salvador under control, when, for all intents and purposes, it did. It was also difficult to maintain that rebel forces were reeling from the failure of the offensive when CNN reporters, standing in front of a smoking building, claimed that this or that attack indicated the offensive was far from over. From the military perspective, they were wrong, but from the journalist's point of view, they were right.

The vast information revolution that CNN only symbolizes could spell real trouble for the CIA in general, and for the DI in particular. Unlike the situation 10 or 15 years ago, we cannot take it for granted that our coverage of political change in Country X will be more timely and comprehensive than that of the media. It becomes more difficult to present analytical judgments that run counter to pictures from the scene or the lengthy analysis of a foreign correspondent who can now communicate

instantaneously with his network or newspaper via fax and satellite. Critics of the press have long complained that the media—particularly TV news—sensationalizes domestic events; now we are watching journalists apply more of their talents to international stories.

Solving the Mystery

There is the argument that the DI product is superior and more important than the story in the *New York Times* because of our access to classified information. One wishes it were so, but a look at a month's-worth of NIDs indicates that the overwhelming majority of the articles is not based on classified information. Evidently, they are classified primarily because of their analytical content.

The following numbers reflect NIDS published from 30 April to 25 May 1990. Items were categorized based on their regional subject matter, so the figures do not necessarily indicate which regional or functional office drafted the piece. Some of the highlights:

- The NID carried 125 items on the USSR. Only five were classified Top Secret, and only 26 were Secret Orcon or Top Secret. Almost all of the stories on Lithuania, arguably the most important international issue at that time, were Confidential Noform.
- One-hundred sixteen European stories were run, of which four were Top Secret. That number expands to 26 when stories at the Secret Orcon level are included.
- Stories dealing with Middle Eastern and South Asian issues generally had the highest classification. Out of 108 pieces, 26 were Top Secret and 63 were at least Secret Orcon. This was the only regional area where items classified Secret Orcon and above were in the majority. The India-Pakistan problem and its nuclear implications contributed greatly to higher classifications, although the principal feature article that appeared on the issue was Secret Noform.

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These numbers overemphasize the importance of "secrets" to our analysis. The pieces were categorized based on the highest classification of any paragraph, although many longer items had only one or two sentences at the Orcon or Top Secret level. Two items in particular stick out because of their unusual classifications. One had a lead that was Secret Noform; all the other paragraphs were Confidential Noform. The lead of the other was classified Orcon, but nothing else in it carried that classification.

Secrets admittedly were important in the coverage of some issues. In addition to India-Pakistan, these included nuclear proliferation, chemical and biological warfare matters, and the Soviet military. More often than not, however, the NID earned its stripes because of only one or two items that appeared in the book.

It is unclear whether these figures represent a change from five or 10 years ago, but at least some recipients of the NID have to wonder about all the mystery. If the DI product does not provide unique information, if it appears after several news programs and papers, and if it can only be four paragraphs or 36 words long, we may not be fulfilling the needs of our consumers or our mission.

Blowing Calls, Blowing Smoke

DI analysts are the international affairs experts. Almost every policymaker, and particularly members of Congress, will tell you that CIA briefings are the best and most objective. So our expertise should help us compensate for whatever comparative disadvantages we may or may not have. The DI, however, appears to be undergoing a crisis of self-doubt about its discipline, an uncertainty that serves as a drag on our expertise. Moreover, the formats and products that we use in some cases actually work against our greatest strength, diluting our expertise to the point of generality.

Two articles in the media illustrate some of the issues that fuel the DI's concern. On 14 May 1990,

Newsweek wrote that "one of Bush's chief foreign-policy advisers ranks the agency's recent track record as only fair . . . good at analyzing trends . . . but poor at predicting the timing of events in the collapse of Eastern Europe." *Newsweek* quotes former Undersecretary of Defense Fred Ikle as saying that CIA analysts "collect a lot of facts and organize them very nicely. But their predictions are wrong." The next month Roger Morris, in a *New York Times* article that belabored the Agency, wrote that "political intelligence could be vested in a revitalized foreign ministry and diplomatic service, where it belongs."

Many DI analysts knowingly react to such criticism by joking that if they could predict the precise timing of events, they would work on Wall Street. But the cynical shrug masks our own disappointment over our inability to call every election or forecast the fall of each dictator, let alone predict the triumph of democracy. We conduct post mortems on our analyses and invite second and third opinions, but we remain confused as to why the DI technique of employing good minds to know everything about a subject and write forward-looking analyses based on intelligence does not hit the mark more often.

This confusion and uncertainty in some cases (b)(1) affects our analyses. For example, even though (b)(3)(n) Cuban leader Castro appears secure, we are reluctant to make that call unequivocally. Many of our caveats are honest— (b)(1) (b)(3)(n) Some caveats, however, are the result of confusion about our discipline. We realize that other political analysts (b)(1) working on other countries (b)(3)(n) predicted a continuation of the *status quo*, and reversed themselves in the NID one week later. We are spooked. We are dismayed that on almost any issue we can point to an individual who was more correct than the organization. What makes it worse is that his or her call was sometimes based entirely on instinct.

Much of this criticism is healthy. We need to analyze our own effort, but we are sometimes

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second-guessing ourselves before the fact. One of the most important lessons to be learned is that no matter how professional we are, we will be wrong on occasion. We predict based on our rigorous approach or we rely on instinct. My prediction would be that instinct overall would have a much worse track record.

Communication of our expertise is complicated by our format and processes. Particularly in current intelligence, the physical limitations of the product lead to analytical limitations. In the survey of NID pieces, almost every office produced more "in briefs"—three- to five-line nuggets of information—than any other category. Anyone who has ever written an "in brief" knows that it is impossible to impart much expertise or any degree of subtlety in the item. In addition, the NID only has room for a small number of pieces. Every office has horror stories concerning an item that waited in the NID queue just long enough to be scooped by the newspapers. Our advantage in expertise is just not relevant if it has trouble leaving the building or is oversimplified.

Answering the Challenge

The DI has for years recognized the need to look hard at the way it does its business. The explosion in the production of less formal typescripts, for example, has been one successful way of providing our expertise to consumers more promptly, comprehensively, and informally. Proposals for an electronic or computer-delivered NID have also been made. The design of the electronic NID, which would allow readers to search computer files for more in-depth information on a subject of particular interest, anticipated the need to provide more analysis more quickly. Budget constraints, however, have delayed many reform proposals.

Given the current fiscal and Congressional climate, the CIA and the DI will probably have to look for less expensive ways to respond to our challenges, at least in the short term. A case can be made, as Roger Morris did in his article, that the CIA no longer needs to be in the business of

political—and current—intelligence. The DI, however, is too good an organization and its people are too talented to abandon this mission. But the time has come to retool.

Decentralize Current Intelligence

There is no easy way to reform the current intelligence process, but perhaps the pain of transition could be eased by patterning the process after what is arguably the DI's most successful product, the typescript memorandum, which is produced at the office level. This would decentralize current intelligence. Each distinct regional and functional area—in most cases, each office—would produce a daily review. The publication would be standardized to the extent that each office product would carry identical cover sheets. It could be called the *DI Daily Review*, with each office using a subtitle to distinguish its product. Other features could include:

- A distribution list, similar to the office's typescript distribution list, aimed at the Assistant Secretary level and below.
- Washington-only distribution at opening of business, using, at least initially, secure fax transmission.
- A Monday edition that, recognizing the generally slow information flow on weekends, would feature more op-ed, speculative pieces. Analysts would have the opportunity to use more of their expertise by writing about ideas rather than facts. Many newspaper articles do not advocate policy but provide a different way of looking at a problem. We should do the same.
- Use of an early-morning team of analysts and managers who would use new information or what appeared in the press to update existing articles. A lot of frustration could be avoided if analysts could use such phrases as "Despite press accounts this morning, we still believe that . . ." Every office may not always need

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such a team, but today in crisis situations analysts already come in early to update the briefers who deliver copies of the *President's Daily Brief* (PDB).

The creation of daily typescripts need not endanger the NID, which has a vast clientele overseas that could not be serviced by the office dailies. And many of its several hundred Washington readers probably would always want a general world overview. Their assistants, however, might pass on to them articles in the *DI Daily Review* that supplemented NID pieces. The DI dailies, in fact, would be more likely to pick up where the NID left off by providing dailies to the Assistant Secretary level and below, whose current intelligence needs are not currently met, at least not by the DI.

The NID production process need not change much, and it might improve. Offices would propose items for the NID, and they would also give the NID Staff their menus for their own daily publications. The preliminary version of the publications would be sent to the staffs late in the day, offering the NID and PDB a chance to pick up stories that turned out to be more interesting than their titles suggested. Similarly, offices would share stories among each other to supplement their dailies and to ensure that CIA published only one version of a story.

Decentralized current intelligence also would pose some problems. They might include:

- *Classification.* As the survey of NIDs indicated, the DI uses little Orcon and Top Secret material. Presumably, the Directorate of Operations (DO) would allow use of most its reports in a document that was Washington-only and had a distribution list similar to typescripts. It would be more difficult to use Top Secret material. Nevertheless, it does not make sense to limit the distribution of our analysis and inconvenience our readers by publishing only in the NID.

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- *Delivery.* This is likely to be a bigger problem and to require funds and bureaucratic finesse to solve. Secure fax centers are springing up everywhere, but more will have to be created to handle the transmission of as many as a dozen different dailies. The real obstacle, however, probably would be delivery within a building. One answer might be to create more positions for DI representatives in Washington.

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Each regional and functional office needs to have its own representative in the appropriate bureau at State. Eventually, the DI might begin to use computer linkups for its daily publications. The material could be transmitted from one word-processing station to another, allowing for the production of a letter-quality product right in the Department of Defense or State. The delivery problem in an electronic age is an overarching one that the DI will have to solve, whether or not we change the way we do current intelligence.

- *Quality Control.* There is a tradeoff between quality control and decentralization. An argument could be made, however, that more timely and in-depth analysis would help redress the balance. DI management also would still be able to review the subject, if not the substance, of daily office publications.

What is Gained

Some of the benefits, such as a more timely product and greater coverage of issues, are readily apparent. But many other benefits are possible.

Better Relations with Policymakers. Daily publications that covered smaller parts of the world or narrower issues should improve DI access to policymakers. The development of a distribution system that allowed the DI product to be delivered personally in and of itself should facilitate feedback and subsequent improvement of our effort. The Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, for example, would receive a document—perhaps four or five pages in length—that contained more of the

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information she really needed. If our product was not satisfactory, if our readers were not reading it, adjustments could be made almost immediately to reflect real demand. If, on the other hand, our analysis proved useful, we probably would increase our access to policymakers.

Better Relations with Congress. Decentralized current intelligence probably would allow us to provide more information to the Congress. Congressmen appreciate CIA briefings, but they are unhappy when we are reluctant to provide things in writing. Reading the NID is even more difficult on the Hill. Daily reviews, however, presumably could be shared more easily with some Congressmen and their staffers—at least on an *ad hoc* basis—because of their lower classification. In any case, it is in the CIA's interest to be of greater service to the individuals who will control increasingly tighter purse strings. DIA officials recently remarked that in a time of budget constraint their analytical arm was emphasizing *ad hoc* products, including answering Congressional requests, and data bases. We should look for ways to expand Congressional access to current intelligence.

Our inability to get our message across to Congress as a whole may have already hurt us in the budget crunch. Many members of Congress seem to have accepted media depictions of the changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as triumphs of democracy. What we may have witnessed instead, however, is the triumph of ethnicity and geography over hollow ideology. DI analysts in fact have made that point, which indicates that country analysis remains important. Despite what some may think, change in Eastern Europe required us to pour more resources into studying the area.

Some Relief from Criticism. The provision of more current analysis in less classified formats—the “demystifying” of intelligence—could help defend against unjust criticism. Certainly, the way the DI does its business today probably invites some of that criticism. We shroud our analysis in deep layers of classification. The reader, much like Geraldo Rivera opening Al Capone's safe, expects to find something wonderful and magical inside—or at least some good secrets. Instead, he finds, for

the most part, facts that he could have read about in the *New York Times* and analysis that only leaves you wanting more. Making our intelligence more accessible and providing more subtlety on a daily basis would probably boost our ratings or provide for a better understanding of our limitations. Having more space to write about problems would almost certainly aid in explaining complicated issues and avoid overly simplistic judgments.

The DI, in fact, should consider whether or not its analysts could generally be more accessible to the public. We have already increased briefings of the press in the last year or two. We could “go public” in a much bigger way: office directors or national intelligence officers could appear in public forums, perhaps on TV, to provide commentary on a particular topic. Such exposure, particularly on TV, would have to be on a selective basis. It could do us a lot of good. Our top officials ought to be just as adept as any other bureaucrat in distinguishing between classified and unclassified information in making his comments.

The Role of Research

The changes suggested in the way we do current intelligence would require a shift in resources. A much more active current intelligence process would be likely to cut down the amount of time analysts could devote to longer papers. One suggestion would be for us to write more typescripts and real research papers and to phase out intelligence assessments. Typescripts usually answer a real question; research papers are necessary to develop analyst skills and a foundation of knowledge. Intelligence assessments, however, tend to be neither fish nor fowl. They are schizophrenic creatures that seek to satisfy both the policymaker, who does not have time to read anything too long, and the expert, who wants to learn something he or she does not already know.

There is some concern in the DI that analysts will fail to become sophisticated thinkers if they are diverted from research and spend too much time writing current intelligence. But that concern can

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be turned around. Is our current intelligence so shallow that analysts can be proficient without really knowing their subject matter? The answer is "maybe"—many offices let their new analysts write short items for the NID early on because the products are fairly straightforward. Daily reviews, on the other hand, would make more demands on analytical expertise.

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Foreign Correspondents

Reforming our Washington work habits would go a long way toward ensuring that the DI remains the most important analysis resource for policymakers. We would, however, still be the only international information service without its own dedicated foreign correspondents. This problem is likely to become worse for the DI in the 1990s. Secure phone lines between embassies and the State Department have already reduced cable traffic in crisis situations. In addition, the revolution in open-source information and the changing world environment is leading the DO to reassess its own collection priorities. Internal political developments may become less important because the State Department and the *New York Times* already report on them. But where does that leave the DI? Where do our secrets come from?

The DI could look at several options to expand its international coverage.

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The Bottom Line

Some change is necessary and some is inevitable. And the DI should be in charge of both kinds. Even if Brezhnev rose from the dead tomorrow, the revolution in information technology alone would force us to alter our work habits. One could even envisage a day when the NID evolves into a video newscast on secure TV nets that are being installed all over Washington.

The DI and current intelligence may be creatures of the Cold War, but both can prosper from its end. US policymakers need even more information on world events. More important, they need an organization that will sift through all of that information, analyze its importance, and place it in the appropriate context. The DI's mission today is to make sure we do that better than anyone else.

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